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FORDE ABBEY

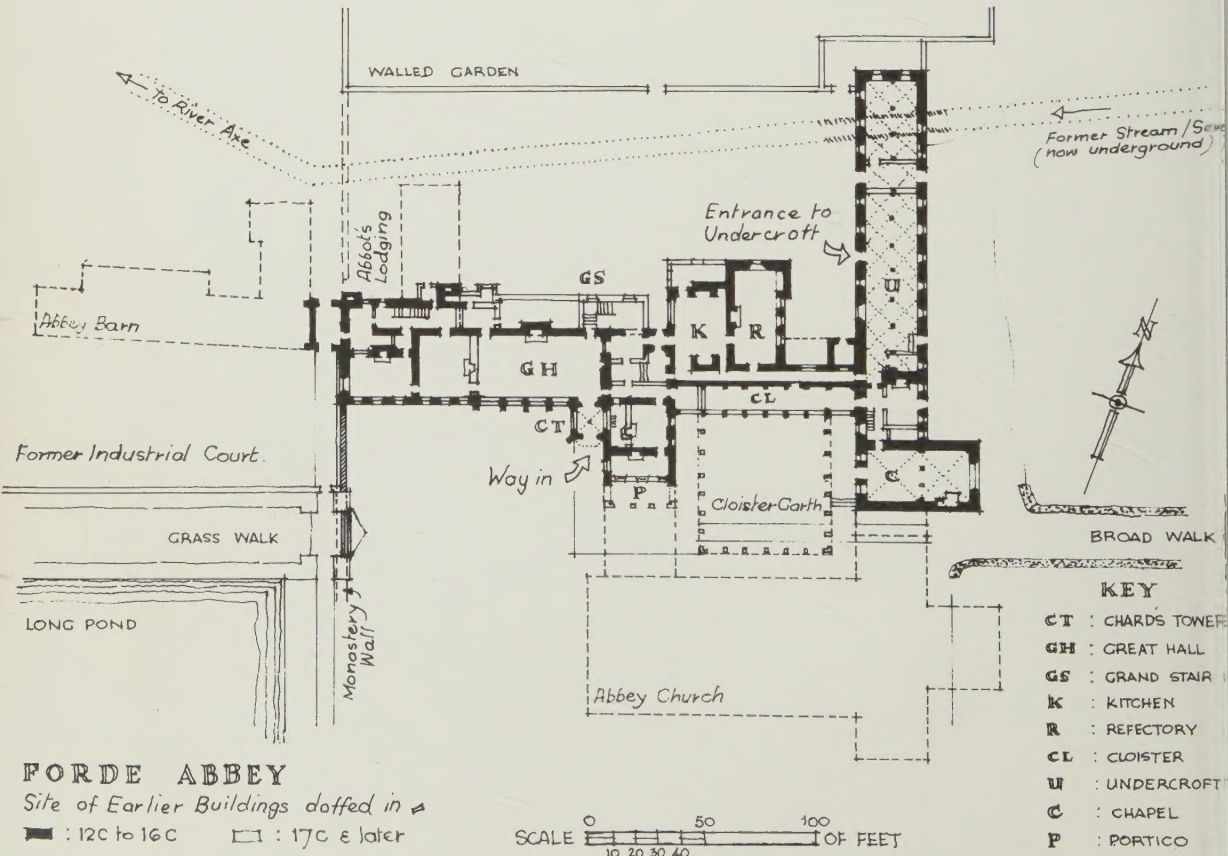
FORDE ABBEY

HISTORY

- 1140 Cistercian Abbey founded by Alicia de Brioniis.
 1184 Abbot Baldwin made Archbishop of Canterbury.
 13 C-15 C Abbey flourishes as industrial and agricultural concern under thirty-two abbots.
 1521 Abbot Chard begins 'modernization'.
 1539 DISSOLUTION OF MONASTERIES: Abbey ceded to Henry VIII.
 1540-1640 Various owners: Pollards, Pouletts, Rosewells.
 1649 Edmund Prideaux converts Abbey to Private House.
 1659 Edmund Prideaux II completes alterations.
 1702-1846 Sir Francis Gwyn and his wife Margaret Prideaux are followed by Edward Prideaux Gwyn (1734), Francis Gwyn (1736), John Fraunceis (Gwyn) (1780), and John Fraunceis Gwyn (1789).
 1846 Abbey sold to Mr. Miles of Bristol, contents dispersed.
 1863 Abbey bought by Mrs. Bertram Evans, followed by Herbert Evans (1890), Mrs. Freeman Roper (1906), Geoffrey Roper (1943), and now
 1974 Mark and Elizabeth Roper.

BUILDINGS & GARDEN

- Chapel and Kitchen remain.
 Undercroft and Dormitory, Refectories and Abbot's Lodging remain.
 Chard's Tower. Great Hall. Cloister.
 Church demolished. Ceiling of Great Hall.
 West end. Staircases. State Rooms.
 Saloon ceiling. Tapestries.
 Battlements. Lakes and Garden (Sir F.G.).
 State rooms redecorated (F.G.).
 Sash windows inserted (J.F.G.).
 'Adam' Room and Portico (J.F.G.).
 Minor additions on north side (Mrs. E.).
 Tree planting. Rock Garden, Arboretum and Bog Garden created (G.R.).
 Conservation and redecoration.





FORDE ABBEY



South view of Forde Abbey in 1834

HOME OF THE ROPER FAMILY

History of the House

During the four centuries that separated the reign of King Stephen from the Reformation, Forde Abbey was a Cistercian monastery. The buildings seen today were all in existence in the Middle Ages, forming the Abbot's and monks' quarters, their kitchen and refectories, and their chapter house. The abbey church has gone, together with the guest wing and three sides of the cloisters, but, though altered, the monastery the monks knew still stands, clothed in the newer architectural fashions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is rare to see so much of a monastery in use as a private house.

Twelfth century. The Cistercians were a branch of the Benedictine order and their first foundation in England was at Waverley in Surrey in 1128. Eight years later Sir Richard de Brioniis founded a daughter-monastery at Brightley in Devon with twelve monks from Waverley, but by 1141 the land had proved too barren for this agricultural community and, their patron dead, they decided to return to the mother-house. On their way, Sir Richard's sister Adelicia offered them the use of the Manor of Thorncombe and a site by the River Axe for their new monastery. The offer was accepted, and within seven years the buildings were ready for occupation. The abbey church was not completed for almost a century, when it was consecrated to the Virgin Mary.

Thirteenth century to fifteenth century. Three hundred years of prosperity followed, and Forde became one of the richest and most learned monasteries in the South-West. The third abbot, Baldwin, became Archbishop of Canterbury, and was to die on the crusades with Richard I whom he had crowned king. In 1191 John became abbot; a well-travelled man of great scholarship and confessor to King John, it was in his time that, according to Fuller, the seventeenth-century historian, Forde 'had more learning therein than three convents of the same bignesse anywhere in England'.



The Abbey Seal

Sixteenth century. While the final years of so many English monasteries are remembered for their feebleness and decadence, Forde ended in a blaze of glory. Thomas Chard, the last of thirty-two abbots, succeeded in 1521. A man of great learning, energy, and imagination, he devoted the next eighteen years to the repair and reconstruction of the fabric of the abbey. Leland, the contemporary topographer, visited Forde in his time and records that Chard was restoring the buildings 'with incredible splendour and magnificence'. But in 1539 Henry VIII ordered the dissolution of the larger monasteries. Richard Whiting, Abbot of Glastonbury, was hanged from his gates for refusing to surrender his abbey; but Chard and his twelve monks, their work unfinished, handed Forde over to the King. Chard was made vicar of Thorncombe, and before the year was out, the abbey and its lands had been leased by the Crown to Richard Pollard for the sum of £49 6s. 6d.

Thus it stood for over a hundred years, owned by absentee landlords, plundered for its stone—an unfinished Gothic palace, a monument to monasticism.



South Front from the Park Garden

Seventeenth century. Edmund Prideaux, Attorney-General to Oliver Cromwell, bought the abbey in 1649 and set about transforming it into a 'palazzo' in the Italian style—a fashion first seen at Hardwick in Derbyshire—for which its monastic layout was curiously well suited. He changed the Abbot's lodging at the west end into private quarters for his family, shortening the Great Hall in the process, converted the monks' gallery in the centre into a grand Saloon, reached by a new Grand Staircase, and added state apartments to the east on a 'piano nobile' over Chard's elegant cloister. The dormer range at the east end was little changed, and the monks' kitchen and refectories were retained, and replanned as service rooms.

All this entailed little structural alteration, but the interiors of the principal rooms were lavishly transformed with panelling and plasterwork, and their external appearance was brought 'up to date' with large mullioned windows of classical proportions (later sashed in a 'Gothick' manner in about 1760).

By 1658 Sir Edmund Prideaux's work was nearly done (he had been made a baronet by the Protector), and in 1659 he died, to be succeeded by his son Edmund. The young Edmund entertained the Duke of Monmouth

during the latter's progress through the West of England in 1680, so that after the battle of Sedgemoor five years later, Prideaux was suspected of supporting Monmouth's cause and was imprisoned in the Tower of London on a charge of High Treason. Judge Jeffreys was ruthless with the poor, but with the rich he preferred to be extortionate: it cost Prideaux £15,000 to save himself from the gallows.

Eighteenth century. In 1702 Prideaux's daughter Margaret inherited the house with her husband Francis Gwyn, who became Secretary at War to Queen Anne. Their descendants lived in the Abbey throughout the eighteenth century and made several minor 'improvements', such as remodelling the portico in the south front, and redecorating the state rooms. The Gwyns created the gardens.

Nineteenth century. The radical philosopher Jeremy Bentham, rather surprisingly, rented Forde Abbey while the last Gwyn spent the years 1815 to 1818 abroad. Bentham had several famous visitors, among whom Sir Samuel Romilly wrote an account of the Abbey for a friend: 'I had heard of it only as a building that had fallen into decay . . . I was much surprised therefore by the cheerfulness, and still more by the magnificence'.



Monks' Dorter

In 1846 the last Gwyn died and the Abbey was sold with all its contents. It was bought by Mr. Miles, a Bristol merchant, who in 1864 again sold the Abbey and its land, with such of the contents as were still left, to Mrs. Bertram Evans. She made modest additions on the north side to link the Kitchen to the Dining-Room, and built the bridge from the head of the Grand Staircase to form the Tapestry Corridor behind the state rooms. Mrs. Evans also repaired the Great Hall roof and some of the plaster ceilings. She left the Abbey to her sons, and then to her niece who had married Freeman Roper.

Their son, Geoffrey Roper, devoted his life to the house and gardens, living uninterruptedly at Forde for nearly eighty years.

Today his son Mark Roper with his wife

Elizabeth and their three daughters occupy and care for the Abbey. They farm still, as the monks did five centuries ago; the main activities now being a forest tree nursery, fruit growing and a herd of pedigree Devon cattle.

The latest business development is the recording of music in the Great Hall. Musicians come from all over the world and stay in the Abbey while they work here. If you find a notice requesting moderate silence it may be that if you sit on the grass slope below Chard's Tower you will hear a world famous artist playing Mozart!

In the 850 years since the Cistercian Abbey was founded all sorts and conditions of people have lived, worked or visited Forde. Today the variety is as great as ever—and the numbers are much greater.

The Architecture

Forde's history shows that since the days of Sir Edmund Prideaux, the owners have never been people anxious to keep up with changing fashions by building in the latest styles, as has happened to so many country houses. The Abbey escaped the Palladian fervour of the eighteenth century as well as the aspirations to grandeur of the nineteenth century.

Herein lies its unique interest and charm—nearly all the major work you see was done within the 200 years 1500–1700, that is to say the robust new forms of English Baroque were married to the final elegance of English Gothic—a combination unimaginable in any other country.

The Exterior

Sir Edmund Prideaux went unselfconsciously about the task of creating for himself a palace out of the old Abbey—he may have been assisted by Edward Carter, an architect responsible for buildings in the Middle Temple. He did not sweep away the great work of Abbot Chard, merely imposing his own ideas of comfort and decoration on the buildings he found. The abrupt collision of architectural styles must have seemed strange at first, but the patina of age, and the grey lichens on the Ham Hill stone, have drawn the buildings together to form a lively composition along the south front—there is even a hint of symmetry in the balance of the Chapter House at the east

end by the three-storey family rooms on the west, with Chard's Tower and the Saloon, 150 years apart in date, forming together an unusual centre piece.

The whole front is subtly united by the crenellated parapets running from end to end. In contrast, the long east flank of the Abbey, especially when seen from the road bridge over the River Axe, in the evening light, still gives a strong impression of a monastery unaltered since the Middle Ages. On the north side the jumble of the centuries is undisguised and, until the middle of the nineteenth century, used to overlook the farmyard. Medieval work is now visible in the twelfth-century Chapel vaulting and the thirteenth-century undercroft and monks' dormitory above. There are also glimpses to be had in odd corners such as the fragment of Early English miniature arcading to be seen in the middle of the wall. Elsewhere traces of the thick walls of the medieval core may be spied by the observant.

Abbot Chard, like many of his contemporaries, was refacing rather than rebuilding—but his tower over the entrance door was all new in the most sophisticated manner of the Perpendicular style. He proudly had carved around the top of the tall oriel windows the Latin inscription which reads, 'Made in the year of our Lord 1528 by Thomas Chard, Abbot'.

The Great Hall behind the tower was unfinished when the Abbey was given up in 1539—its original impressive size may be imagined from the long roof which extended over six great bays.

The Kitchen Garden and north side of Abbey



The Tour of the House

Entering under Chard's Tower we find the GREAT HALL with its magnificent oak panelled roof possibly put on after the Dissolution. Prideaux would have panelled this room, filled in the windows on the north side and created the fireplace.

On the west wall hangs a portrait of the Duke of Cumberland by David Morier.

The Great Hall

The brass chests were made in India in the nineteenth century.

The stone figures in the alcove at the east end were found in 1970 under the Chapel wall and came from the west door of the Abbey church. They are of St. Catherine and Queen Margaret and date from the thirteenth or fourteenth century.



On the GRAND STAIRCASE, leading up to the Saloon the picture of Martha and Mary is by Cornelis Engleszen. This staircase with its elaborate plaster ceiling was entirely built by Prideaux in 1658 and leads you up to the great Saloon.

In the SALOON the rich plasterwork is exceptional, possibly unique in Britain, for the imagination and skill of the unknown craftsmen who moulded it. It repays a long look.

The Grand Staircase

The Mortlake tapestries were woven for the room, ordered by Sir Edmund Prideaux. His death, the Restoration, and the arrest of his son for helping the Duke of Monmouth, delayed their delivery. Eventually they were presented to Sir Francis Gwyn, who married Prideaux's granddaughter, by Queen Anne in recognition of his services as Secretary of State for War.







These tapestries are the most important works of art to be seen in the Abbey—they represent scenes from the Acts of the Apostles, painted by Raphael for the Sistine Chapel in Rome, and woven at Mortlake from the artist's original cartoons. These cartoons were acquired by Charles I and are now in the Victoria and Albert Museum. The borders are exceptional, possibly from designs by Clein, and the brilliance of the colours is attributable both to the Dorset air and care and attention over three centuries. The Saloon was formed out of the medieval monks' gallery which joined on to the Abbey church.

Follow along the TAPESTRY PASSAGE, the rosewood and ebonized cabinets here are Indo-Portuguese.

On your left is the CREWEL ROOM, a bedroom constructed in the thirteenth-century roof of the monks' kitchen.

At the end of the passage is the UPPER REFECTORY or FRATER of the monks. It retains its fifteenth-century timber roof and at one period served as a hay barn. It was transformed as a library around 1890.

The screen below the MINSTRELS GALLERY is made from a collection of Breton bedsteads. The set of ebonised beechwood chairs, with Dutch tapestry work, were bought by Sir Francis Gwyn in preparation for a visit by Queen Anne.

The Carys globes, made in 1815, are well worth inspection.

Tapestry of the Miraculous Draft of Fishes



The Saloon



The Upper Refectory

The Prideaux Bedroom





The Oak Bedroom

Go across the landing at the top of the wooden stairs and you will find the series of state rooms built by Prideaux above the cloisters. All have the intricate plaster ceilings which fantastically depict plants turning into people. These rooms were redecorated in the eighteenth century as can be seen from the door cases and dadoes. Above the chimney piece in the OAK ROOM is a painting of three Flemish girls by G. J. Cuyp. Beyond the Oak Room two flights of stairs lead you to the MONKS' DORMITORY.

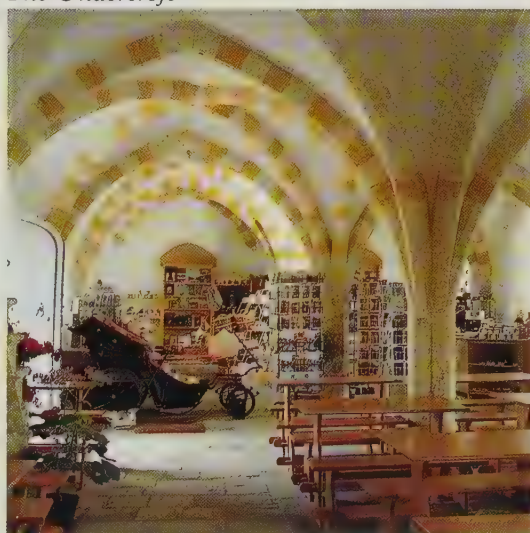
Originally an open room 100 feet long with a massive oak roof, the dormitory was divided into cubicles for each monk, with a central corridor.

The fourteenth-century oak roof is still in place but it is concealed by an eighteenth-century plaster ceiling. Bedrooms were made along the east side by Sir Francis Gwyn, for his household staff.

Down two more flights of stairs and the CLOISTERS will lead you back to the Great Hall. Refaced in Ham Hill stone by Abbot Chard it is possible that the plaster vault was created by eighteenth-century Gwyns to replace a plain ceiling under Prideaux's state rooms.

The thirteenth-century UNDERCROFT has finely vaulted and banded arches. This is now the restaurant.

The Undercroft



During work on the North Undercroft in the spring of 1991, a wall painting of the crucifixion was uncovered.

It dates from between 1270 and 1320, which makes it the earliest surviving Cistercian figure painting in England.

A visiting scholar has written: 'The Forde Crucifixion presents itself as a significant visual clue to the nature of a vanished community in a bygone age.'

The Chapel



The Chapel

The Chapel was once the Chapter House of the Abbey. Here the monks would have met to discuss business and the work of the day.

The early twelfth-century vaulting can be clearly seen. Abbot Chard created the east window. Sir Edmund Prideaux put in the fine carved screen and the Gwyns the intricate and unusual pulpit. Their coffins lie in the crypt below.

Today Forde is still a home and not a museum. The great sale of 1846 dispersed the entire contents of the house except for the

tapestries and the great chandelier in the hall. Some were recovered including Gwyn's chairs and the monastic cartulary. Most of the furniture, family pictures and Sir Francis Gwyn's famous collection of oriental china are gone forever. If the Abbey cannot boast the treasures of some houses it remains the home of a family who can still repeat the words of Jeremy Bentham writing from here at Christmas 1814: 'Nobody that could stay here would go from hence. Nobody is so well anywhere else as everybody is here'.

The Gardens

The landscape of the garden is partly natural and partly created by the Gwyns in the eighteenth century.

It was then that the lawns were laid out, walls built and the monks' ponds reshaped. Yew tree hedges were planted surrounding elaborate little gardens, with wonderful views around every corner.

The Bog Garden

All that remains of these gardens are the ponds and some of the great yews and lime trees. The *Rhododendron ponticum*, douglas firs, cedars and redwoods were all planted by the Evans family and are now rather more than a hundred years old. Herbert Evans also planted the golden yews and junipers on the lower lawn. He made a typical Victorian garden, full of dark shrubberies and rhododendrons, with a family of rabbits in every clump of pampas grass.





The Rock Garden





The Long Border

Using the legacy of the eighteenth-century landscape and the nineteenth-century trees, two generations of Ropers have made a garden worthy of the house which it surrounds. It is hard to describe a garden which is always changing with the seasons and years. Its character in the spring is totally different from that of the autumn. There is however no time of the year when things of interest to the gardener, and beauty to the visitor, cannot be found.

Since it is not a formal garden it is possible to wander profitably in any direction. This tour is suggested for completeness and ease of description.

Start your tour of the garden along the border which runs beside the Long Pond. The herbaceous section on your left is best from early July. There is however colour on the right hand side considerably earlier. Against the wall are many unusual plants benefiting from its protection. They do not always survive a severe winter. *Carpentaria*, *Fejoia* and *Azara* are among the species you will, hopefully, find.

Halfway down the border look to your left and find the three cascades falling in line from the four ponds which form the nucleus of the garden conceived by Sir Francis Gwyn. To the left of the Mermaid Pond, beside the Paulownia tree, stands a pergola made from pillars taken from the Abbey church.

At the far end of the border, either keep straight ahead or go up the steps to your left and make your way along the stone path. Here you will find a collection of magnolias, rhododendrons and other shrubs. You will find *Acer dissectum*, *Acer griseum*, *Pieris 'Forrestii'* and *Pieris taiwanensis*, *Magnolia sargentiana robusta*, *kobus* and *wilsoni*, also *Kalmia* and *Eucryphia nymansay* and *pinnatifolia*.

Whichever path you take you will emerge on to the Mount. The Mount is dominated by its trees. The vast redwood, *Sequoia sempervirens*, is the coast redwood of California. The incense cedar, *Calocedrus decurrens* rises like Cleopatra's Needle at the far end. From this area there are magnificent views of the Abbey across the ponds.

Try to find your way up to the Great Pond, which is the first in the chain and is four acres in extent.

Here you will find the Beech House and if you follow around the right hand side you will come to the Bog Garden. This has been formed from an area of pond silted up over the centuries. May and June are the best months here and you will find a large collection of Asiatic primulas, Meconopsis, iris and many other plants with their origin in the Himalayas. Osmunda ferns, Lysichitum and Gunnera grow happily beside the streams.

You must now retrace your steps and find your way to the top of the lawns in front of the Abbey. On your right is a ha ha, a sunken wall designed in the eighteenth century to keep animals in the park. Keep straight along the gravel walk and you will find yourself in the Rock Garden. This was created just before the First World War out of an old gravel pit. Much work has been done here recently with the help of Mr. Jack Drake of Inshriach, who retired nearby. A large collection of alpine plants will be found. A fine *Hydrangea petiolaris* climbs a thorn tree beside the top pool.

You can now return to the Abbey by way of the Park Garden. At the top end of this garden above the scree bed are the remains of the ice house. On the yew hedges that surround it can be found the scarlet flowers of *Tropaeolum speciosum*. If you are still strong, then out to your right beyond the tennis court is the

Arboretum. This was planted by G. D. Roper post 1947. Here is a very fine collection of trees and shrubs. The soil is a well drained acid loam and is away from the gravel which lies under most of the garden. The Arboretum extends out to the road and down to the Broad Walk along which you drove on your arrival.

At the back of the Abbey is a large walled kitchen garden. Among the vegetables and fruit trees you will find Mr. Alan Lewis' nursery. He has for sale a large collection of rare and unusual plants.

The hope is that keen gardeners will discover treasures in surroundings familiar to Beatrix Potter's Mr. McGregor and Peter Rabbit.



The Gardens are open daily throughout the year 10.00 a.m. to 4.30 p.m. (last admission).

The Abbey is open 1.00 p.m. to 4.30 p.m. (last admission) Easter, Sundays, Wednesdays and Bank Holidays. 1st April to the end of October. Coaches and private tours of the Abbey are welcome by arrangement.

All enquiries: Forde Abbey, Chard, Somerset, TA20 4LU.

Telephone: (01460) 221290.

Fax: (01460) 220296.

Forde Abbey Fruit Gardens

Pick your own and ready picked fruit from mid June to mid August

Telephone: (01460) 220384 Shop: (01460) 30460

History and description written by Richard Tyler and Mark Roper.

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PLAN OF GROUNDS



ABBEY NURSERY

Open March to early November 10.00 a.m. to 4.30 p.m. for rare and unusual plants and shrubs.

Telephone: (01460) 221366.



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